LIFE STYLES, SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL BELIEFS
RELATED TO UNSAFE SEXUAL PRACTICES AMONG YOUTH
IN PERI-URBAN YANGON, MYANMAR

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This study was directed to explore the various unsafe sexual practices among selected youth in peri-urban Yangon Myanmar. These unsafe sexual practices were explored from the real experiences of the youth. Youth lifestyles, gender differences in youth sexuality in terms of sexual meanings and sexual partnerships, and beliefs on Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), HIV/ AIDS and unintended pregnancy prevention and condom use were explored to comprehend their influence on sexual practices.

This study was conducted in a selected peri-urban township, which is an economically active industrial zone of Yangon. A total of 21 young people (10 women and 11 men), all of whom had experienced sexual intercourse without using condoms, and some of whom had had STIs and unintended pregnancy. They were purposively selected and interviewed to explore their sexual practices, their lifestyles, sexual meanings, sexual partnerships and beliefs on STIs, HIV/AIDS and unintended pregnancy prevention. Five sessions of focus group discussions were conducted to provide information and general ideas about the youth in the area. Non-participatory observation and key informant interviews were performed to confirm and support the findings of Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews. Unstable family structure and poor family interaction led the youth to be exposed prematurely to the outside world moreover; work environment permitted the escape from the traditional family control. These provided the chance to develop peer networks under peer pressure and new interests. These new interests and peer networks lead the youth to create intimate sexual relationship. As sexual matters are socially constructed and also bounded by traditional culture, the concepts on sexuality in terms of sexual partnerships and meanings lead the youth to engage in unsafe sexual practices. Gender differences in perceptions related to sexual partnerships and meanings revealed the young women were at risk for unsafe sexual practices. Most of them would experience negative consequences of these practices resulting in social, financial and reproductive health problems. Similarly, most of the young people believed that they were not at risk of unsafe sex so they used condoms irregularly. This was more so for the young women. Integrated and comprehensive youth programs are necessary to reinforce the pre-existing ones, which affect the unsafe sexual practices of the youth. Future research should address the linkage among insider views and actual sexual practices, sexual acts, homosexuality, bisexuality, condom use and preferred source of information, and gender differences and its effects on real sexual practices among the youth.

KEY WORDS: YOUTH LIFESTYLES / SEXUAL MEANINGS / SEXUAL PARTNERSHIPS/ BELIEF / UNSAFE SEXUAL PRACTICES / PERI- URBAN